Promoting Gender Equity in Virtual Meetings

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Inequity based on gender and race remains a challenge in medicine. Physicians who identify as historically underrepresented in medicine and women face challenges in promotion,[1,2] report a dearth of mentors,[3,4] and have lower salaries than their white men counterparts.[5] These disparities have prompted leaders in medicine to renew their focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion.

In academic medical centers, gender inequity manifests across a multitude of professional outcomes. Women earn less clinical revenue than men, even after adjusting for part-time status,[6] and are less likely to become full professors.[7] They lag behind men in terms of achieving scholarly funding, high-profile presentations, publications, and leadership positions.[8] The COVID-19 pandemic has heightened these disparities. Women scientists trail behind men in proposals for grant funding[9]; women submit manuscripts to preprint servers at a lower rate than men[10]; and women authors remain underrepresented in COVID-19–related publications, especially in first- and senior-author positions.[11]

The explanation for these disparities can partly be explained by societal norms. Women have historically borne greater responsibilities for childcare and household tasks compared to men.[12] Women physicians spend 8.5 more hours per week on childcare and domestic duties than men.[13] Women physicians are also more likely to have spouses/partners who are employed full-time and, as a result, are more likely to take time off if childcare is disrupted compared to men physicians.[13] After marriage, women physicians decrease their work hours and then decrease them further when they have children, whereas men physicians either do not change or increase their work hours when these life changes occur.[14]

During the pandemic, the gap in household responsibilities between the genders has widened.[15] With schools and daycares closed, childcare coverage was disrupted.[16] These disruptions likely contributed to the disproportionate increase in the number of women physicians working part-time during the pandemic when compared to men.[17] One-third of physician mothers with young children changed their work schedules during the pandemic to work from home or work fewer hours.[18] During the first surge of the pandemic in 2020, for parents with preschool-age children, only women physicians reported a decrease in full-time work,[19] suggesting that the burden of childcare responsibilities fell disproportionately on women. These predicaments have resulted in women sidelining their

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Box 1: A toolbox for promoting gender equity in virtual meetings: Highlighting key effective strategies

Suggestions in advance of the meeting:
- Email the agenda to all participants at least 3–5 business days in advance
- Follow up with key participants to check if any other agenda items need to be added
- Solicit feedback from key participants, ensuring that women are represented among the presenters
- Ensure that a diverse range of voices and perspectives are represented among the meeting attendees

Suggestions during the meeting:
- Facilitate introductions among individuals unfamiliar with each other
- Change to gallery view so that all participants can be monitored for those who want to speak up
- Set ground rules for using virtual "hand raising" functions to speak, and encourage use of the chat
- Designate someone to take minutes
- Record the meeting, if possible
- Connect participants' ideas to amplify comments and give credit, paying particular attention to women who raise points, such as: "Dr Smith recommended this project, which aligns well with Dr Jones's suggestions"

Suggestions after the meeting:
- Distribute minutes within 2–3 days
- Share the video with those who were unable to attend
- Follow up with individuals who were assigned tasks within 1–2 wk to discuss any concerns or barriers around the tasks

careers during the pandemic. The decrease in work hours, likely to compensate for the burden of additional domestic responsibilities, meant less time to apply for leadership positions or pursue research, and therefore fewer career advancement opportunities. Particularly for women who may be in the early stages of their careers, these changes could impact their eligibility for promotion and opportunities for career advancement.

Social distancing measures and work restrictions during the pandemic required many academics to work from home. Women faculty whose academic and administrative interactions now occur primarily virtually may be struggling to participate fully in academia amidst these additional pressures. Best practices on running virtual meetings have been published,[20] such as incorporating meticulous planning, having an agenda, turning on videos, and designating a moderator.[20,21] The lay press has highlighted behavioral differences between women and men during virtual meetings, noting that women are interrupted more frequently and feel like they cannot speak at length for fear of being judged as too emotional or long-winded.[22] However, no guidance exists on how leaders should specifically prioritize gender equity in virtual meetings. Without attentiveness to implicit bias, meeting structures, and interpersonal dynamics that may hinder women's ability to contribute to virtual conversations, high-impact decisions may perpetuate gender inequity or fail to incorporate diverse perspectives.

Although the potential for marginalization of women during virtual meetings is complex and multifaceted, in this commentary we have focused our recommendations to provide strategies that leaders of virtual meetings, regardless of gender, can use to promote equity in representation and engagement. Of note, we use "woman/women" here, being inclusive of all individuals who identify as women, and "leader" as a generic term for any individual responsible for executing meetings. The authors, who have expertise in medical education and equity, diversity, and inclusion work, highlight strategies they found particularly helpful from their own experiences (Box 1).

Offer Flexibility in Scheduling Meeting Times

Traditional work hours may not be optimal for virtual meetings for parents who have school-age children engaging in remote learning. Asking participants what times work best for meetings is crucial to messaging a culture of empathy, while providing participants a modicum of control. For some parents, accommodating early morning or evening times for 1-on-1 or informal meetings may be helpful; it is still best to avoid these generally inconvenient times for large meetings. Although academic positions have traditionally required work outside of conventional "workday" hours, leaders should not perpetuate the encroachment of virtual meetings on work–life boundaries. If a meeting time is proposed outside working hours with the intention of being flexible, one should ensure that compensatory time is freed up during the workday. In addition, focusing on diversity and ensuring adequate representation of perspectives among meeting participants (both those who are invited and can attend) is important in building a culture of inclusion. Finally, for meetings that last multiple hours, building in breaks will allow participants to avoid online fatigue and attend to necessary tasks, such as checking in on children or elders.

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CREATE A DETAILED, CONSENSUS-DRIVEN AGENDA TO ALLOW FOR ADVANCE PREPARATION

The leader of the meeting can craft an agenda and solicit input on the items. Ideally, the agenda should be distributed in advance and include the goals for the meeting and an ordered list of topics, along with a time allotment and a designated speaker for each topic. Advance notice may help participants formulate their ideas ahead of time. This approach may specifically benefit women who are in men-dominated organizations or work in environments that are not inclusive, where they may be worried about facing criticism if they speak up. Studies have shown that women are less likely to speak up in group settings, perhaps due to fear of backlash.[23] Therefore, if agendas are distributed in advance, women may be able to hone in on the aspect of the agenda they want to discuss and may feel empowered to speak up given this advance notice.

ANTICIPATE AND WELCOME THE PRESENCE OF CHILDREN

In the current era, working from home entails sharing space with other household members, and parents with children will inevitably have youthful faces appearing unexpectedly in the background of a virtual meeting. Leaders can foster an inclusive climate when these instances occur by greeting them with a smile and a wave and encouraging participants to introduce their children. In a similar fashion, parents may feel apprehensive about speaking up (and therefore keep themselves muted) out of hypervigilance for loud background noises. When an audio interruption arises, the meeting leader can give parents time to redirect their children and then proceed with the agenda. Leaders should not chastise parents for interruptions and should not call undue attention to noises or interruptions. Comments such as, "It is so loud where you are," or "You seem distracted," can be seen as insensitive to people's circumstances around caretaking responsibilities. In general, acknowledging the coexistence of children, particularly for women who may be unduly burdened with these responsibilities, may help normalize the fact that colleagues may not have the luxury of an isolated home office or alternative childcare.

AVOID ICEBREAKERS THAT MAY HIGHLIGHT GENDER INEQUITIES

Introductions before meetings for those who do not know each other can be helpful to facilitate an inclusive environment. For large meetings, this can be done via smaller breakout rooms or via written introductions in the chat box. This holds especially true when women are newly joining an entrenched, colleague group of predominantly men. Even meeting elements as banal as icebreakers should be thoughtful, with a focus on equity. Asking colleagues about what new hobbies they have picked up during the pandemic may strike women who are managing a disproportionate share of household responsibilities while working as tone deaf. Instead, leaders can invite participants to share experiences that will not emphasize the inequities that women academics may be experiencing.

BE EXPLICIT ABOUT YOUR RATIONALE FOR THE USE OF VIDEO, BUT BE ADAPTIVE TO CIRCUMSTANCES

Leaders may recommend that videos are encouraged to allow better visualization of nonverbal cues to help all participants be heard. However, they can also accommodate the nonsharing of videos, in recognition that participants may be balancing simultaneous competing demands in the home. The advantages of video over audio alone are many. For speakers, they include the ability to emphasize points with hand gestures, facial expressions, and posture. For listeners, they include expressing understanding or disagreement, forecasting responses, or conveying purely nonverbal information. That said, leaders can be thoughtful to the additional burden that video may place on women due to societal norms that excessively focus on their appearance.[24] The proliferation of portable lights to enhance one's appearance while on video calls, the plethora of video conferencing beauty tutorials online,[25] and the built in "Touch Up My Appearance" filter embedded in some video conferencing applications demonstrate the importance that society places on appearance and physical beauty for women. Women may feel compelled to maintain a certain physical appearance that aligns with societal expectations for beauty. The maxim that leaders, regardless of gender, should avoid commenting on physical appearance holds equally for virtual professional meetings.

TRACK IDEA GENERATION AND AMPLIFY THOSE WHO SPEAK UP

When women speak up, they may not be acknowledged for their ideas,[26] which can consequently harm their prospects for career advancement.[27] When women aides in President Obama's White House staff meetings found their comments being ignored, they began to reiterate other women's suggestions, giving credit to the woman who originated the idea. They amplified each other's voices and highlighted the behavior they wanted to see

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Box 2: Amplification of voices in the era of virtual meetings

In a large virtual meeting, the leader may not be able to see all participants amidst the array of video windows, so it becomes even more imperative to track suggestions, particularly to counteract the social phenomenon where others may take credit for ideas raised by women.

- This amplification technique involves:
- Tracking idea "ownership"
- Reinforcing it explicitly
  "The important point that Sara raised was that…"

Additionally, to ensure that all have had an opportunity to speak:

- Invite others to speak
  "Would anyone who hasn't previously spoken like to add something?"
- Make direct observations
  "I haven't heard from everyone in the group here."
- "Cold call" individuals in an affirming or personalized way
  "Ruth, I'd love to hear your perspective given the work you've done on this project."
- Invite dissent
  "I would like to hear some drawbacks to my idea."

happen from others.[28] This "amplification" strategy became so popular that it crossed over into other sectors. The leader can amplify women's voices and encourage participation by using the techniques suggested in Box 2. Once modeled consistently, this practice of amplification will ideally be perpetuated by other participants, creating a norm whereby ideas are regularly acknowledged.

PREPARE NONJUDGMENTAL VERBAL SCRIPTS FOR INSTANCES OF SPEAKER INTERRUPTIONS AND TO REDIRECT DOMINANT VOICES

Research shows that men routinely interrupt women[29] and talk longer than women during meetings, even in settings as formal as the United States Supreme Court.[22] Virtual platforms have the potential to exacerbate speaker interruptions because it is more difficult to visualize nonverbal speaking cues, particularly in large meetings with multiple small participant windows or in meetings where individuals forego the video option.[22] When women are interrupted, they are not able to finish their ideas, propose new ones, or gain confidence in their ability to be heard as a valuable member of the team. These microaggressions impact women's workdays, leading to decreased productivity and, subsequently, less opportunities for career advancement.[30]

Because women are more likely to be interrupted, leaders can mediate interruptions that occur repeatedly, while role modeling how to respectfully deal with them.[31] One framework from the business literature is to "listen, validate, probe/redirect," as outlined in Table 1. An additional step to bolster this framework could be that of deciding to minimize interruptions by stating at the outset of the meeting that the goal is to create an environment where everyone allows the speaker to finish their thoughts before adding comments.

USE INTERACTIVE TOOLS WITH THE INTENTION OF ENSURING EQUITY

Interactive virtual meeting tools are useful adjuncts to ensure that all participants have a voice. Leaders can remind participants about any relevant interactive functions such as a chat function or "raise hand" button, breakout room function, or use of anonymous polls (Figure 1). The chat function, in particular, can facilitate communication for people who may feel tentative about public speaking.

DEPUTIZE OTHERS TO HELP SUPPORT TEAM ENGAGEMENT AND MONITOR PARTICIPANTS

Admittedly, implementing all the strategies above may be cognitively taxing. Leaders may find it challenging to manage presentation slides while simultaneously monitoring participants' videos and the chat. Appointing a colleague to serve as the moderator can ensure active, respectful engagement within the group (Figure 2). Particularly because women are given fewer career development opportunities that increase the chances of promotion,[32] it may be helpful to select a woman colleague to serve

Step	Description	Possible verbal script
Listen	Listen actively to the person	"[Interrupter's name], your perspective is that…"
Validate	Validate the comment	"…and I think it's a strong point."
Probe	Probe further for their thought process	"What makes you say that?"
Redirect	Redirect to maintain focus or keep meeting on time	"Because the focus of our meeting is… I'd like make sure we have time to address…" "Perhaps we can discuss after the meeting so I can understand your perspective fully."

Table 1: Steps for dealing with interruptions

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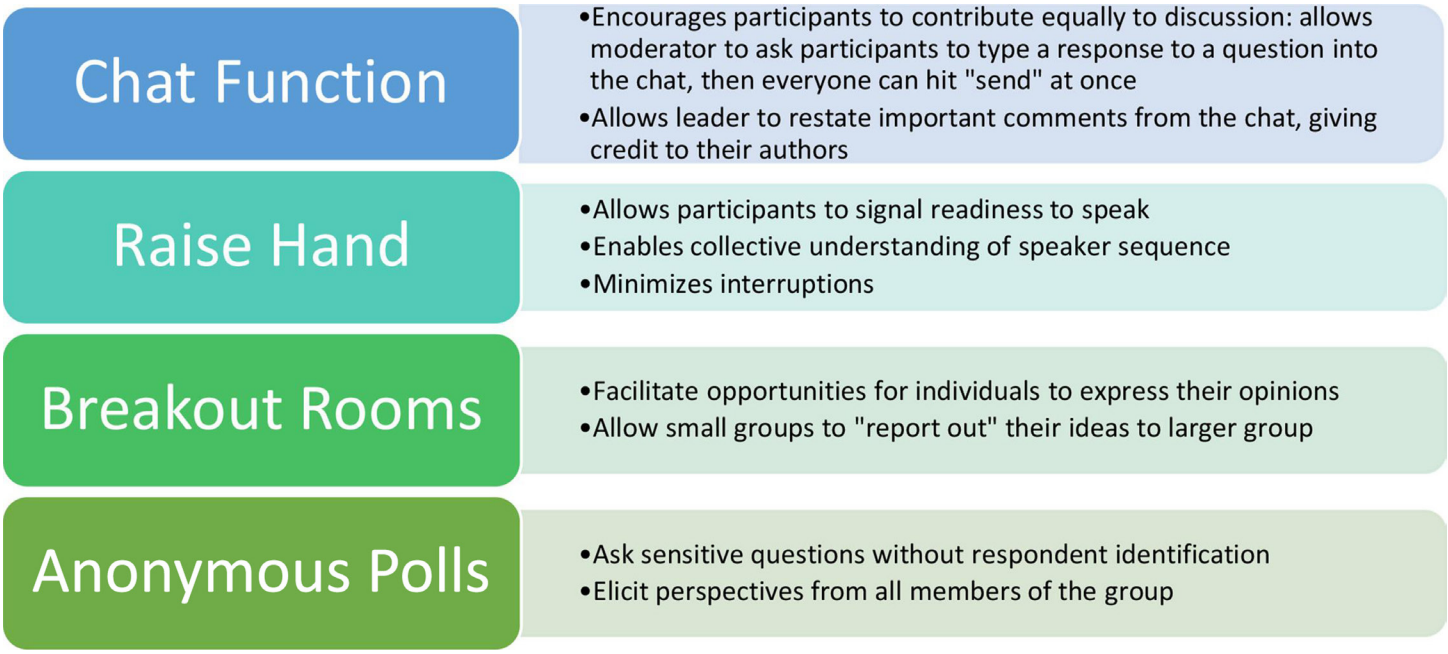


Figure 1: Use of interactivity tools.

as moderator. Women may tend to be assigned administrative roles[32] (such as note taker) that are important but may negatively impact their ability to be active meeting participants. Choosing a woman colleague as the moderator empowers her, increases her visibility, and enhances her leadership skills. Rotating this role may promulgate a higher level of engagement for all participants and increase career development opportunities while allowing the leader to stay neutral.

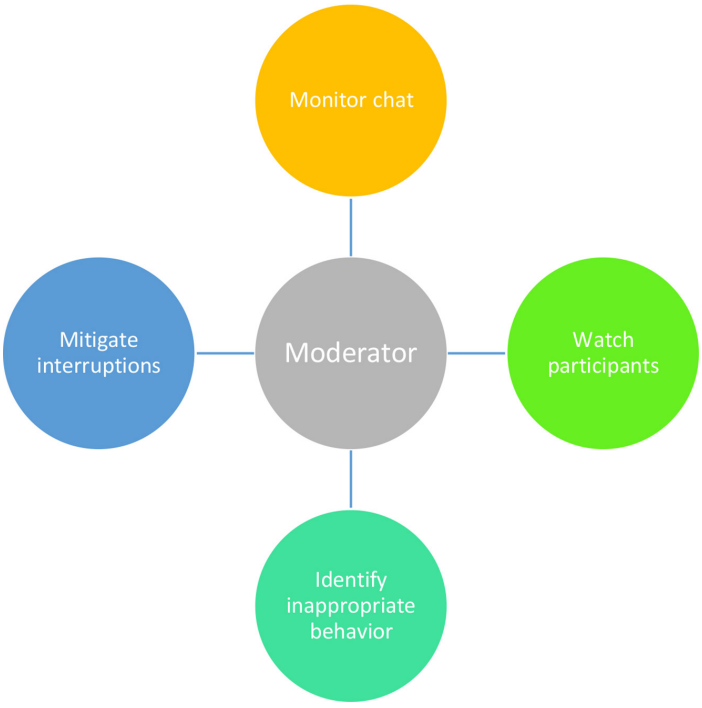


Figure 2: Empowering others to support team engagement.

Conclusion

Although remote work has the potential to exacerbate already unequal stresses on women in medicine, virtual meetings present a unique opportunity for leaders to promote gender equity. Leaders can ensure that all members have an opportunity to contribute ideas equally and create a safe virtual space for all participants. Leaders can be proactive rather than reactive when planning meetings so that they may thoughtfully and effectively support engagement of women. Finally, gender equity is a shared responsibility, and these methods are as equally germane to meeting participants as they are to leaders.

At the same time, these approaches may not be universally applicable to all workplaces. We recognize that gender roles vary widely based on cultural differences as well as personal choice and circumstances. Implementation of these tips may thus have variable effectiveness in different settings, or may conversely be viewed as threatening to women participants, depending on societal norms. Appreciating the context is essential in enacting practices

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intended to amplify women's voices where they will make a difference. In sum, we exhort leaders to approach virtual meetings with an equity mindset to confront gender disparities in academic medicine, as fostering an environment of inclusivity will increase employee satisfaction, organizational commitment, and productivity.[33]

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